



## SUMMARY REPORT

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**Agenda Date:** 6/3/2025

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**To:** Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District  
**Department or Agency Name(s):** Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District  
**Staff Name and Phone Number:** Pamela Swan, 707-565-7348  
**Vote Requirement:** Majority  
**Supervisory District(s):** Second District

**Title:**

Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program Grant for South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project

**Recommended Action:**

Approve four property-specific resolutions of the Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District ("Ag + Open Space"):

- A. Authorizing the submission of four applications to the State of California Department of Conservation under the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Program (or SALCP) to be used towards acquisition of conservation easements for the four contiguous properties that compose the South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project (Project) with grant values as follows: a) Grove Property \$1,000,000, b) Rodgers Creek North Property \$1,500,000, c) Rodgers Creek South Property \$1,500,000, and d) Skyline Property \$3,000,000;
- B. Authorizing the Ag + Open Space General Manager to execute grant agreements with the State of California in substantially the same form as on file with the Clerk if the project is awarded funding, with minor modifications as may be approved by County Counsel and committing to match of Ag + Open Space and potential other public and private funds of a) Grove Property \$4,000,000, b) Rodgers Creek North Property \$4,500,000, c) Rodgers Creek South Property \$5,000,000, and d) Skyline Property \$7,000,000;
- C. Certifying that no known conflict of interest or appearance of conflict of interest exists as to any member of the Ag + Open Space Board of Directors as related to the South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project;
- D. Authorizing the Ag + Open Space General Manager to execute and implement the grant agreements, including signing applications, agreements, invoices, and other documents related to the applications and grant agreements, if awarded funding.

**Executive Summary:**

Ag + Open Space staff is requesting Board approval of four property-specific resolutions authorizing the district to apply for grants from the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALCP) and to take related actions to execute and implement South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project grants if awarded by the State. The State requires Board resolutions to include a certification that there are no known or perceived conflicts of interest by any member of the Board of Directors as related to the project.

Staff have submitted four SALC pre-applications and Ag + Open Space has been formally invited to submit full applications for SALC grant funding. The grant funding would support the potential acquisition of conservation easements on the four contiguous properties that compose the South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project.

Ag + Open Space staff is negotiating easement terms with the respective landowners with an aim of protecting the Project's unique agricultural utility, climate resiliency, landscape-scale habitat connectivity and natural resources, and scenic beauty for the benefit of the local community and visitors alike.

Executing grant agreements with the State will not commit Ag + Open Space to acquire the conservation easements, and staff will return to the Board for authorization to proceed if negotiations are successful.

The SALC guidelines state that match requirement for each of the conservation easements is 50 percent, with competitive applications leveraging private and other government investment to the maximum extent possible. Ag + Open Space will pursue match funding from the CA Wildlife Conservation Board, which has formally invited full applications for all four properties, as well leverage Measure F sales tax revenue. Ag + Open Space will return to the Board if the funds are awarded, and negotiations are successful for authorization to acquire the conservation easements.

**Discussion:**

The Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Program is a state grant program of the Strategic Growth Council's Affordable Housing and Sustainability Program (AHSC), which supports the State's greenhouse gas emission goals by making strategic investments to protect agricultural lands. The AHSC aims "to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through projects that implement land use, housing, transportation, and agricultural land preservation practices to support infill and compact development." Protecting critical agricultural lands from conversion to urban or rural residential development promotes smart growth within existing jurisdictions, ensures open space remains available, and supports a healthy agricultural economy and resulting food security.

The SALC Program is administered by the State Department of Conservation. SALC provides funding to leverage the protection of strategically located, highly productive, and critically threatened agricultural land via permanent agricultural conservation easements in order to avoid increases in greenhouse gas emissions associated with conversion of agricultural lands, consistent with the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006.

Ag + Open Space has completed one project with the assistance of the SALC Program-the acquisition of a conservation easement on the Mattos Dairy near Two Rock- and is currently negotiating a similar transaction for the Bianchi Dairy. This request relates to a grant application for the South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project.

Taken together, the South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project is 1,700 acres of landscape scale, regenerative agriculture in an ecologically rich, climate resilient, critical wildlife corridor. Sonoma Mountain has been a local and regional conservation priority for decades. Residents and tourists from around the world are welcomed to the area with their first views of the County's namesake mountain; and Ag + Open Space has secured an important opportunity to protect four contiguous agricultural properties with conservation easements.

Formerly known as Triangle G Ranch, each property exemplifies cherished values in Sonoma County: an agricultural way of life in harmony with wildlife, nature, and beautiful scenery. Acquiring conservation easements will ensure permanent protection of these properties for their regenerative agriculture, critical wildlife habitat, climate resiliency, and scenic benefits. The four properties- Grove (370.5 acres), Rodgers Creek

North (392.11 acres), Rodgers Creek South (420.7 acres), and Skyline (491.6 acres)- are currently under a grazing lease with the Sonoma Mountain Institute, a nonprofit organization at the leading edge of regenerative agriculture. Additional detail of each of the four properties is included in the Attachments and materials on file with the Clerk of the Board.

The South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project represents a one-of-a-kind opportunity to achieve key complementary conservation outcomes including:

- Restricting conversion of the land to residential uses that would increase greenhouse gas emissions and impair its utility as a legacy landscape-scale grazing agriculture operation.
- Reducing development and wildfire risk in a designated CALFIRE high wildfire hazard severity zone. Existing zoning allows for subdivision into as many as 26 lots for estate-style homes. Under the proposed conservation easements, one home may be built on each of the four properties; Rodgers Creek North and South will additionally allow for agricultural worker housing.
- Avoiding fragmentation in a regionally recognized critical habitat linkage zone and sequestering carbon to build climate resilience.
- Protecting vital habitat for several threatened and sensitive wildlife species, including oak woodland, freshwater marsh, and several miles of Rodgers Creek, a tributary to Sonoma Creek and critical stream habitat for Endangered Species Act-listed steelhead and California red-legged frog.
- Preserving an iconic ridgeline that stretches nearly six miles and is equally visible from the towns of Petaluma and Sonoma.

The SALC guidelines state that match requirement for each of the conservation easements is 50 percent, with competitive applications leveraging private and other government investment to the maximum extent possible. Ag + Open Space will pursue match funding from the CA Wildlife Conservation Board, which has formally invited full applications for all four properties, as well leverage Measure F sales tax revenue, if awarded. Ag + Open Space has received positive feedback on all four pre-applications and has been formally invited to submit full applications. As part of the SALCP application, the State requires certification that there is no known conflict of interest, or appearance of a conflict of interest, for the Board of Directors, as related to the proposed acquisition of an agricultural conservation easement on the South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project.

To complete the application for a SALCP grant, Staff recommends that the Board adopt the attached four resolutions (one for each property).

By entering into the grant agreements, if awarded by the State, Ag + Open Space is not committing to the acquisition of the conservation easements from the South Sonoma Mountain Properties Project. The conservation easement acquisitions will be presented to the Board for its independent review following completion of staff's negotiations with the landowners.

**Strategic Plan:**

This item directly supports the County's Five-year Strategic Plan and is aligned with the following pillar, goal, and objective.

**Pillar:** Climate Action and Resiliency

**Goal:** Goal 5: Maximize opportunities for mitigation of climate change and adaptation through land

conservation work and land use policies

**Objective:** Objective 2: Develop policies to maximize carbon sequestration and minimize loss of natural carbon sinks including old growth forests, the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and rangelands. Encourage agricultural and open space land management to maximize sequestration

These grant applications would further goals of Ag + Open Space's strategic plan, the Vital Lands Initiative by leveraging local tax dollars through outside grants.

If negotiations are successful, acquisition of conservation easements on the South Sonoma Mountain Properties would further the Vital Lands Initiative goals by protecting lands that do the following: Support diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture (Agricultural Lands Goal); Protect open lands that surround and differentiate the County's urban areas and contribute to the unique scenic character of the County (Community Identity Goal); Protect natural lands and aquatic habitats that support sustainable aquatic ecosystems and water resources (Water Goal); and protect natural lands and terrestrial habitats that support plants, wildlife, and biodiversity (Wildlands Goal).

**Racial Equity:**

**Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?**

No

**Prior Board Actions:**

None.

**FISCAL SUMMARY**

<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>FY23-24 Adopted</b>	<b>FY24-25 Projected</b>	<b>FY25-26 Projected</b>
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested			
<b>Total Expenditures</b>			
<b>Funding Sources</b>			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			
<b>Total Sources</b>			

**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

Ag + Open Space will return to the Board if the funds are awarded and negotiations are successful for authorization to acquire the conservation easements. The SALC guidelines state that match requirement for

each of the conservation easements is 50 percent, with competitive applications leveraging private and other government investment to the maximum extent possible. Ag + Open Space will pursue match funding from the CA Wildlife Conservation Board, which has formally invited full applications for all four properties, as well leverage Measure F sales tax revenue, if awarded

<b>Staffing Impacts:</b>			
<b>Position Title (Payroll Classification)</b>	<b>Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)</b>	<b>Additions (Number)</b>	<b>Deletions (Number)</b>

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

N/A

**Attachments:**

1. Location Map
2. Project Summary Sheet
3. Resolutions
  - 3.1. Grove Property
  - 3.2. Rodgers Creek North Property
  - 3.3. Rodgers Creek South Property
  - 3.4. Skyline Property

**Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:**

1. State Grant Agreement Form Terms and Conditions
2. SALCP Guidelines<sup>2</sup>
3. Property Maps
  - 3.1. Grove Property
  - 3.2. Rodgers Creek North Property
  - 3.3. Rodgers Creek South Property
  - 3.4. Skyline Property